

# TWITTER AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION PLATFORM IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN GHANA

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## ABSTRACT

*This article argues that political parties need to emphasise relationship building as part of their election communication to ensure the sustainability of the party. This is based on the premise that they should also engage in two-way communication. Social media such as Twitter provides the opportunity for engagement and two-way communication with the electorate. It is therefore not surprising that the use of social media by political parties is becoming a common phenomenon. This is also the case in Ghana where political parties are increasingly using social media in their campaign communication. The question however remains whether political parties are using the interactive capabilities of social media or merely focusing on one-way communication messages. Against this background, this article examines the use of social media in intra-party elections of the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress in Ghana during the 2018 elections. By means of content analysis, the messages on the political parties' Twitter platforms during their national executive elections in 2018 were analysed. The findings indicate that the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress used Twitter for one-way communication with stakeholders and the public. The messages mainly informed the public about their activities and programmes, rather than interacting with them to develop mutually beneficial relationships. The political parties made tweets infrequently to users and followers on Twitter. Therefore, the political parties did not utilise the interactive capabilities of the social media platform to engage with the electorate and build relationships.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Political Communication, Social Media, Twitter, Election Campaigns, Stakeholder Relations.*

**Received:** Jun 15, 2021; **Accepted:** Jul 05, 2021; **Published:** Jul 22, 2021; **Paper Id.:** IJCMSDEC20213

## INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking political communication is defined as the use of symbols and language by politicians and the media on the one hand, and behaviour of citizens, on the other hand, to elicit intended and unintended effects on the political cognition, attitudes and behaviours of individuals, or influence outcomes of public policies of countries (Perloff, 2014). Traditionally, this has been done by means of press conferences, commentaries and interviews in the media for publicising political messages, opinions, manifestoes, policies and programmes (Asah-Asante, 2015; Oye, 2009; Debrah, 2005). This consisted mainly of one-way communication from political role players to the public. However, from a relationship perspective, Muhingi, Agonga, Mainye, Mong'are and Maranga (2015, p. 57) posit *political communication* as an interactive process that involves the exchange of information and messages among "political parties, news media and the public". This could enhance relations or create conflicts of "interests and ambitions between individuals, groups and political structures in the process of attaining power," or perhaps holding on to power. The relationship perspective is especially important when investigating electoral communication as a form of political communication (Klingemann & Römmele, 2002).

The main aim of election communication is to garner votes to ensure the sustainability of the party (Denton, Trent & Friedenberg, 2020; Kiyohara, Maeshima & Owen, 2018) and by implication sustainable democracy. This implies that political parties not only have to persuade voters to vote for them during elections, but also need to establish long term relationships and create alliances with diverse groups and people with similar goals and interests (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). The need for engaging with the public and electorates between elections to enable them to secure more votes at elections encourage political parties to focus on relational and reputational factors in communication and campaigns (Dragaset, 2014; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014, 2013). The interactive nature of social media ideally provides the opportunity for two-way communication, and also for electoral communication. It is argued in this article that *social media including Facebook and Twitter could provide interactive avenues for direct interpersonal engagements* for mutually beneficial relationships between political role players (Dragaset, 2014; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014; Grunig, 2001).

Social media have become important communication platforms in recent election campaigns as is evident from the election and re-election of President Barack Obama (Borah, 2016). Social media were mainly used to advance the political agendas of parties (Dzisah, 2020; Tettey, 2017), membership drives, political marketing, advertising and canvassing votes (Gyampo, 2017; Penplusbyte, 2017), but not necessary to engage the electorates. This observation is noted by scholars (see Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019; Windeck, 2011; Riaz, 2010), in that social media activities and engagements are not significantly driving democracy and participation in African countries including Ghana. This might be because the interactive nature of social media also poses problems for political parties because they cannot easily determine their narratives, particularly during elections.

However, it is argued in this article that to enable the long term sustainability of the political party, and by implication democracy, it is necessary to utilise the interactive abilities of social media to enable direct engagements with the electorate and political role players (see Denton, Trent & Friedenberg, 2020; Kearney, 2017; Dillard, 2008). Political parties globally, including Ghana, should thus be taking advantage of social media by using these platforms in their activities, programmes and campaign communication. It is against this backdrop that the current article explores how the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress used Twitter as social media platform during the 2018 intra-party election campaigns. In doing so, the following research question is addressed:

- How do the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress use Twitter as a political communication platform in election campaigns in Ghana?

### **Literature Review: The Changing Nature of Electoral Communication**

As argued above, a relationship approach in political communication has become more important in modern day politics to ensure the sustainability of political parties. *Relationship management* is a “management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics on whom their success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994). Research has indicated that two-way symmetrical communication is the ethical and effective way to establish mutually beneficial relationships. This is because two-way symmetric communication provides stakeholders and the public with the opportunity to exchange information and feedback for support and cooperation. Mutually beneficial relationship dimensions focus on trust, openness and involvement of organisations’ stakeholders and the public in decision-making via two-way communication (Grunig, 2001; Cutlip *et al.*, 1994).

Given the need for two-way communication in political communication and election campaigns, social media platforms could contribute to the quality of engagements by governments and political parties with citizens and electorates (Boateng, McCracken & Lubombo, 2020; Kreiss, 2016; Kalsnes, 2016; Larsson, 2015). The use of social media in engaging and conversing with citizens beyond traditional mass media provides political parties and politicians with access to communities, which enables interactions with their constituencies and the broader public (Ndlela & Mano 2020; Muhingi *et al.*, 2015; Beciu, 2011; Mayfield, 2008). It is therefore expected that social media would become increasingly important in political communication (Ndlela & Mano, 2020; Dzisah, 2020; Sweetser, 2011; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). This is also the case in Africa as is evident from several studies analysing the use of social media in elections (Ndlela & Mano, 2020, Boateng *et al.*, 2020). These studies confirmed that social media contribute to political engagements, mobilisation and participation (Hoffmann & Suphan, 2017; Beciu, 2011; Mayfield, 2008), and campaign fund-raising (Borah, 2016).

When looking at the literature it would seem that we can summarise the functions of social media in political communication as *soliciting support, fund-raising and interactive engagement with the aim of building relationships*. Traditionally, soliciting support has been one of the most important outcomes of electoral communication. Social media can also support this function (Enli, 2017; Borah, 2016; Penplusbyte, 2017). The unique abilities of social media provide political role players with unique opportunities to influence the electorate, by means of information acquisition via political marketing and advertising (Biswas, Ingle & Roy, 2014). It is also evident that social media as interactive platforms enable political parties to raise funds from their supporters and the public, especially during election campaigns (Gyampo, 2017; Borah, 2016; Penplusbyte, 2017). This was also the case in Ghana where political parties and their presidential candidates used social media platforms to solicit funds and donations from the general public during the 2012 and 2016 general elections (Dzisah, 2020; Gyampo, 2017; Penblysbyte, 2017).

The real value of social media as a political communication platform lies in the interactive capabilities contributing to relationship building. Social media promote openness for meaningful political communication and discourses in mobilising support for political activities. The relational resource goals of political parties on social media could be achieved if the personal rewards, emotional support and gratification that are sought by users and visitors of their social media platforms are addressed through interactions. For example, while Facebook via its social networking features provides a means of getting and staying in touch with people and establishing relationships, Twitter as a micro-blogging platform allows users to engage people and track news and discussions (Volders, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011).

With their potential to advance relational political engagements, political role players have not only used social media communication to mobilise support, but to widely relate to different stakeholders and the general public (Boateng, 2019; Dragaset, 2014; Gonçalves, 2014). Political parties and campaigners could take advantage of their social media connections and get users talking about them and share their policies and programmes to win votes in elections. With social media, electorates could believe that they have some intimate relationships with political role players online, which may influence their voting behaviour because political parties control, craft and communicate convincing messages on these platforms to influence the public (Biswas *et al.*, 2014).

The categories of Gong and Lips (2009) are relevant and suitable for this research in analysing data from the Twitter platforms of political parties. This article uses Gong and Lips' framework because the categories focus on social media communication relationships and situate the benefits of different forms of engagements in developing, sustaining

and enhancing long term relations between political role players and the electorates. These content categories demonstrate how two-way versus one-way communication could be used in relating with the public. *Tweets* are messages published on Twitter (Volders, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). There are different types of tweets on Twitter. These messages could be texts or multimedia containing pictures, audio and video formats (Coulombe, 2004).

*Information provision* messages draw the attention of audiences to particular news, events and situations in the form of *news releases*, *press statements* and *policy statements* (Gong & Lips, 2009). Messages that are targeted at identified audiences and specific groups of the public, such as opponents and segments of voters are *target campaigning* (Gong & Lips, 2009). *Information provision* and *targeted campaigning* involve one-way communication and persuasions in canvassing for votes during elections. Messages that are aimed at interaction could be done through *question and answer sessions*, as well as *responses to enquiries* from audiences to promote conversations and sustain relationships. *Question and answer sessions* allow social media users the chance to ask questions, while *responses to enquiries* entail responding to issues raised by audiences (Gong & Lips, 2009). *Interactive* and *multi-media* chats promote engagements, especially through *likes*, *re-tweets*, *comments*, *replies* and *shares*, among others on Twitter, to agree, endorse, build trust and enhance mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, the messages tweeted on these social media platforms should be interactive to promote relationships.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Content analysis

Content analysis was done to explore how the political parties in Ghana use social media in communication practices and intra-party election campaigns.

### Sampling

The New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress were selected for this study because they have been participating in elections since 1992 and therefore are established parties in Ghana. The focus of this study is the intra-party elections in 2018. The New Patriotic Party was the first to hold its elections from 6 July to 8 July 2018, followed by the National Democratic Congress which had its elections from 17 November to 19 November 2018. The selected social media was Twitter because it is a popular platform among Ghanaians (Dzisah, 2020; Boateng, 2019; Gyampo, 2017).

The timeframe was set from the seven days leading up to their respective 2018 national executive elections, three days during those elections, and another seven days after the elections. Therefore, data were collected from the official Twitter platforms of the New Patriotic Party from 29 June to 5 July 2018 (7 days before); 6 July to 8 July 2018 (3 days during) and 9 July to 15 July 2018 (7 days after). For the National Democratic Congress data was collected from 10 November to 16 November 2018 (7 days before); 17 November to 19 November 2018 (3 days during) and 20 November to 16 November 2018 (7 days after). From Twitter, 16 tweets were recorded from the page of the New Patriotic Party, while the National Democratic Congress did five tweets over the period (See Table 1). The tweets collected from these two platforms of the political parties are in different formats, including videos, audio, pictures, texts, comments, likes, shares, replies, reactions and retweets. The data was captured by means of a screen captor (Microsoft Snipper Tool) for screenshots of tweets made by the two political parties during the different periods sampled.

## Content analysis

As Krippendorff (2004) and Babbie (2001) suggest, content analysis includes the coding of raw data into meaningful or standard forms. This could be in the form of coding acts with regard to underlining themes in the data that was analysed (Bryman, 2004). Content analysis was employed to quantitatively determine four categories of information from the data collected from Twitter according to a coding scheme. Using the coding scheme, dates of daily Twitter tweets, as well as their corresponding numbers of *comments, shares, tweets, likes, replies* and *retweets* were recorded. The research used the coding framework of Gong and Lips (2009), such as *Information provision, Interactive chats, Multimedia* and *Targeted campaigning* to explain how political parties adopt Twitter to engage with stakeholders in the public sphere, in campaigns, for dissemination and for retrieving information of different formats (Sauter & Bruns, 2013).

Information provision messages draw the attention of audiences to news and events without attempts to seek feedback from audiences (Gong & Lips, 2009), while interactive chats involve the exchange of texts, videos and audios in real time between participants in communication, which attempts to elicit a response, feedback and collaboration (Solar-Adillon *et al.*, 2016). Multimedia messages involve posts and tweets in picture, audio and video formats (Coulombe, 2004), while targeted campaigning messages focus on identified audiences and specific groups within the public (Gong & Lips, 2009). Tweets in different formats are grouped under each of the four categories of Gong and Lips (2009). Under Gong and Lips' (2009) categories, this study coded tweets into *news, press release* or *policy statements*, or involved *interactive chats, questions* and *answers or responses to enquiries*, and whether these messages were *pictures, audios* or *videos*, or targeted *specific voter segments* and *opponents*. Data from content analysis of Twitter was quantified to determine the number of tweets made by the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress over the sampled period for discussion.

## DISCUSSION

This section discusses data collected from the Twitter platforms of the two political parties to determine how they used *one-way* and *two-way* communication in relating with stakeholders and the public.

### Frequency of Tweets

#### The New Patriotic Party

In the 2018 internal national executive elections of the New Patriotic Party, the party communicated 16 times on Twitter (Refer to Table 1). These messages on the platforms were made up of different formats, such as videos, audio and texts. Put together, the 16 tweets that represented diverse communication *content* categories, including *information provision, interactive chats, targeted campaigning* and *multimedia messages* (see Table 1: *news/press releases, question/answer sessions, pictures/videos* and *opponents*) on Twitter by the New Patriotic Party attracted 1 543 likes, and 89 replies, which were retweeted 258 times, indicating endorsements by audiences of messages to other users and friends on the platforms.

#### The National Democratic Congress

The National Democratic Congress communicated 5 times (messages) in different formats on Twitter (see Table 1: *news/press releases, question/answer sessions, pictures/videos* and *opponents*) during the 2018 national executive elections. The 5 tweets made by the National Democratic Congress during the national executive elections (Refer to Table 1) attracted 1 361 replies and 124 likes, which were retweeted 180 times by its followers on Twitter.

## One-Way Communication

### Information

Most of the tweets made by the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress fell into the information provision category. Information provision messages draw the attention of audiences to news and events without necessarily eliciting responses from audiences (Gong & Lips, 2009); this is typically one-way communication. Political parties put messages to inform or provide news to the public and citizens through social media. The New Patriotic Party tweeted two press releases and 12 news items to provide information to the public on Twitter during the sampled period in its 2018 national executive elections. On the other hand, the National Democratic Congress tweeted two news items but no press release on Twitter during its 2018 national executive elections. The New Patriotic Party posted 2 press releases, while the National Democratic Congress posted 3 press releases on their Facebook platforms.

The political parties tweeted messages, such as “*Liberal Party, UPP, PPP and CPP all present solidarity messages @NPP Conference 2018,*” and “*Report of the state of the party being delivered by Ag. General Secretary #NPP Conference 2018,*” and “*This is a single national delegate’ congress in our history and it has been awesome. We are grateful to our members and supporters*” (www.twitter.com) by the political parties on their Twitter platforms.

The National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party used Twitter largely for the purposes of public information, that is, spreading their information and messages from their political parties to their stakeholders and the general public using press statements and news releases, and picture and video contents without eliciting responses or feedback from audiences. The focus on public information in the communication practices of the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress on Twitter challenges them in maximising their appropriation of these platforms for sustaining mutual engagements, conversations and relationships with stakeholders and the public for support. This consequently minimises the potential and utility of Twitter as a platform for giving stakeholders and users the chance to mutually maximise their political expressions, information and issues through interaction (Kearney, 2017). This is especially true because through the political appropriation of social media for engagement, communication and interaction, political parties are able to connect and directly or interpersonally relate with the public and many people globally.

## Two-Way Communication

### Interactive Messages

Interactive chats involve the exchange of texts, videos and audio in real time between participants in communication, which elicit feedback and promote collaboration (Solar-Adillon *et al.*, 2016). For the 17 days sampled for each of the political parties, the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress did not tweet interactive chats on Twitter; that is two-way communication. The findings show that the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress failed to reply to comments and to address issues raised by recipients of their messages (*tweets*) on Twitter platforms during the sampled study period, preventing relevant and sustainable conversations. The political parties did not seem to be particularly concerned about *addressing interaction-goals* of their audiences in Twitter communication. As the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party do not particularly interact and converse on Twitter, it prevents them from using two-way symmetrical communication on social media, which Boateng *et al.* (2020), Dragaset (2014), Goncalves (2014) and Strömbäck and Kioussis (2014, 2013) argue are useful for political public relations and mutually beneficial relationships via political communication.

### Multimedia Messages

Multimedia messages include posts and tweets in picture, audio and video formats (Coulombe, 2004). The multi-media messages of the two political parties involve pictures and videos. For the 17 days sampled for each of the political parties, the New Patriotic Party tweeted 2 pictures, while the National Democratic Congress also tweeted 3 pictures on their Twitter platforms.

### Direct Targeting

Targeted campaigning involves tweets that are targeted at identified audiences and specific groups within the public (Gong & Lips, 2009). Considering the categories of messages (Refer to *Specific voter segments* and *Opponents* in Table 1), the National Democratic Congress and New Patriotic Party did not use Twitter for targeted campaigning programmes and activities. During the 17 days sampled for each of the two political parties in their respective national executive elections in 2018, the New Patriotic Party made no tweets targeting their opponents or specific voter segments. Similarly, the National Democratic Congress did not tweet any messages that targeted political opponents or specific voter segments.

Despite the encouragement by scholars (Kearney, 2017; Hadji, 2016; Gonçalves, 2014; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014, 2013) for the use of social media in influencing the public to achieve political goals by seeking opinions and feedback through interactions, neither the New Patriotic Party nor the National Democratic Congress transmit, and tweet their political messages and information on the platforms to exploit the maximum potential and utility of Twitter for interactions. This is so because these political parties could not exchange coherent messages to sustain conversations with stakeholders and the public in determining and addressing the expectations of people. These political parties could rather be more interested in creating or maintaining their presence and identities, profiling their organisations, members and leaders on Twitter without developing bonds and long-term relationships with the general public towards election campaigns.

Considering the findings of Dzisah (2020), Gyampo (2017) and Tettey (2017) on the significant transformation presented by social media to democracy and politics in Ghana, this article contradicts their assertions that political parties use social media frequently in communicating policies on key issues, including Twitter, as shown in the content categories of tweets on the sites (Refer to *Policy Statement* in Table 1). The recognition of the significance of social media has not been well accepted, or perhaps not put into maximum use by the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress as these political parties have not extensively exploited the full potentials of Twitter.

Given the categories of social media messages (Refer to *Interactive chats*, *Questions and answer sessions* and *Response to enquiries* in Table 1), the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party are not particular about soliciting the opinions, views and voices of stakeholders and the general public with respect to current and topical issues that might impede development in the country. This is contrary to the suggestion by Gyampo (2017) that social media provide users, citizens and supporters the opportunity to express their thoughts, opinions and views on political issues via conversations.

Given how the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party used Twitter in their respective national executive elections in 2018, these political parties and their communication officials may not have the political public relations competence and skills to appreciate the significance of mutually beneficial political communication and engagements through the use of interactive chats and conversations to establish relationships with the public and voters for



election campaigns. This could contribute to the ad-hoc use of social media communication including Twitter in communication and electoral activities of the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party.

Given this, the article situates Twitter as a unique and convenient interactive platform to enhance interpersonal political engagements for the advancement of political agendas and campaigns. This is important because social media give users and political parties the opportunity to control the contents of their messages with no traditional intermediaries between engagements or interactive and interpersonal exchange of information. This is achieved through direct posts and tweets with the public and stakeholders for responses, conversations and mutually beneficial relationships. However, the minimal use of Twitter coupled with a lack of direct responses from political parties to users and public reactions, comments and feedback on messages disseminated makes it difficult to advance political agendas and campaigns through interpersonal engagements and interactions on the platforms.

**Table 1: Categories of Twitter Content of the National Democratic Congress and New Patriotic Party**

| Political Parties | Content Categories    |               |                   |                   |                              |                       |            |               |               |                         |           |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|-----------|
|                   | Information Provision |               |                   | Interactive Chats |                              |                       | Multimedia |               |               | Targeted Campaigning    |           |
|                   | News                  | Press Release | Policy statements | Interactive chats | Question and answer sessions | Response to enquiries | Pictures   | Audio content | Video content | Specific voter segments | Opponents |
| <u>NPP</u>        | 12                    | 2             | -                 | -                 | -                            | -                     | 2          | -             | -             | -                       | -         |
| <u>NDC</u>        | 2                     | -             | -                 | -                 | -                            | -                     | 3          | -             | -             | -                       | -         |

Source: [www.twiiter.com](http://www.twiiter.com)

## CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical point of departure in the article was that political parties should emphasise relationship building in their political communication with citizens. This would imply that political communication should also include two-way communication to enhance the traditional one-way communication. The article argued that Twitter could improve interactive communication and engagements for support in political activities and election campaigns of political parties and therefore enhance the relationship between political parties and their constituents. Political parties in Ghana can especially use Twitter targeted at interactive engagements with stakeholders and the general public. Given the ability of social media to promote interpersonal communication across distance and location, audiences of messages on platforms could participate in interactive discussions with political parties to advance relationships and the long-term sustainability of the party. These social media could change how political engagements and campaign communication are conducted because political parties and citizens can mutually address issues in real-time for understanding and beneficial relationships. Against this background, it investigated how the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress used Twitter during their 2018 national executive elections.

From the research findings, this article concludes that political parties in Ghana *have made efforts to use social media* to connect with their followers and the public. However, the infrequent and minimal use of Twitter by the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress for passing information to the public does not enable them to enhance sustainable mutually beneficial relationships for support towards elections. The insignificant number of tweets by the political parties during the 2018 national executive elections provides evidence to suggest that political appropriation of social media in Ghana is still developing. Political parties are not maximising the potentials and usage of Twitter



consistently to address topical issues and stimulate conversations with the public to posit them favourably with the public via the interactive features of the platforms. The research found that the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress use Twitter for one-way communication with stakeholders and the public. These political parties use Twitter to inform the public about their activities and programmes, rather than interacting with them to develop mutually beneficial relationships. The political parties made tweets infrequently to users and followers on Twitter. The National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party need to improve their social media use, particularly Twitter, for engaging and interacting with users and the public to galvanise support of citizens, followers and supporters in advancing political agendas and election campaigns.

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